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HOOSIERS REMINDED 'STOMACH FLU' IS NOT INFLUENZA

INDIANAPOLIS—Winter is the season for flu, but state health officials want to remind Hoosiers the “stomach flu” is not actually influenza. However, both can be prevented.

“This time of year, we hear a lot of talk about the flu and we want to be sure the public understands the difference between influenza and what is commonly called the stomach flu,” said Pam Pontones, state epidemiologist at the Indiana State Department of Health. “We want to help the public prevent both illnesses, but to do so, they need to understand the differences.”

According to Pontones, viral gastroenteritis, or the “stomach flu” is not actually flu at all. It is a viral infection of the intestinal tract. It is spread through eating or drinking contaminated food or drink or by close contact with an infected person.

“Influenza vaccinations do not protect against viral gastroenteritis (or the stomach flu),” warns Pontones. “Prevention does include frequent hand washing, but also disinfecting contaminated surfaces, promptly washing soiled clothing and avoid preparing food if ill with gastrointestinal symptoms such as diarrhea or vomiting.”

Pontones says influenza or the “the flu” is a viral infection of the respiratory tract. Influenza is spread by respiratory droplets from close contact with infected persons or contact with contaminated surfaces or objects. Infection can occur when influenza viruses contact the eyes, mouth, or nose, and possibly through inhaling droplets from a sneeze or cough. Sometimes people may become infected by touching surfaces or objects contaminated with influenza viruses and then touching their eyes, mouth, or nose.

“The best defense against influenza is to get vaccinated,” said Pontones. “In addition, individuals should be sure to practice frequent, thorough hand washing and avoid touching their eyes, nose or mouth. When possible, of course, they should stay away from known infected persons.”

December 5-11, 2010 is National Hand Washing Awareness Week. Pontones says regular and thorough hand washing in warm, soapy water is a great way to prevent the spread of many illnesses, including viral gastroenteritis and influenza.

“Whenever you are ill, whether with viral gastroenteritis, influenza, or any other contagious disease, it is important for you to stay home from school or work,” said Pontones. “Staying home will not only help you get the rest you need, but will also keep you from spreading your illness to others.”

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FLU NOT STOMACH FLU
ADD ONE

Signs and symptoms of Influenza (“the Flu”) versus Viral Gastroenteritis (“Stomach Flu”):

Viral Gastroenteritis (“Stomach Flu”)

- abdominal cramps,
- vomiting,
- watery diarrhea,
- fever (usually slight),
- headache, and
- fatigue

Influenza (“the Flu”)

- fever 101 degrees Fahrenheit, or greater
- headache
- fatigue
- cough
- muscle aches
- sore throat

In the coming months, many people will be getting together with families and friends to celebrate the holidays. Staying healthy and not spreading disease is one of the best gifts you can give them,” said Pontones. “We hope these tips on disease prevention will help every Hoosier get through this winter free from influenza and viral gastroenteritis.”

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